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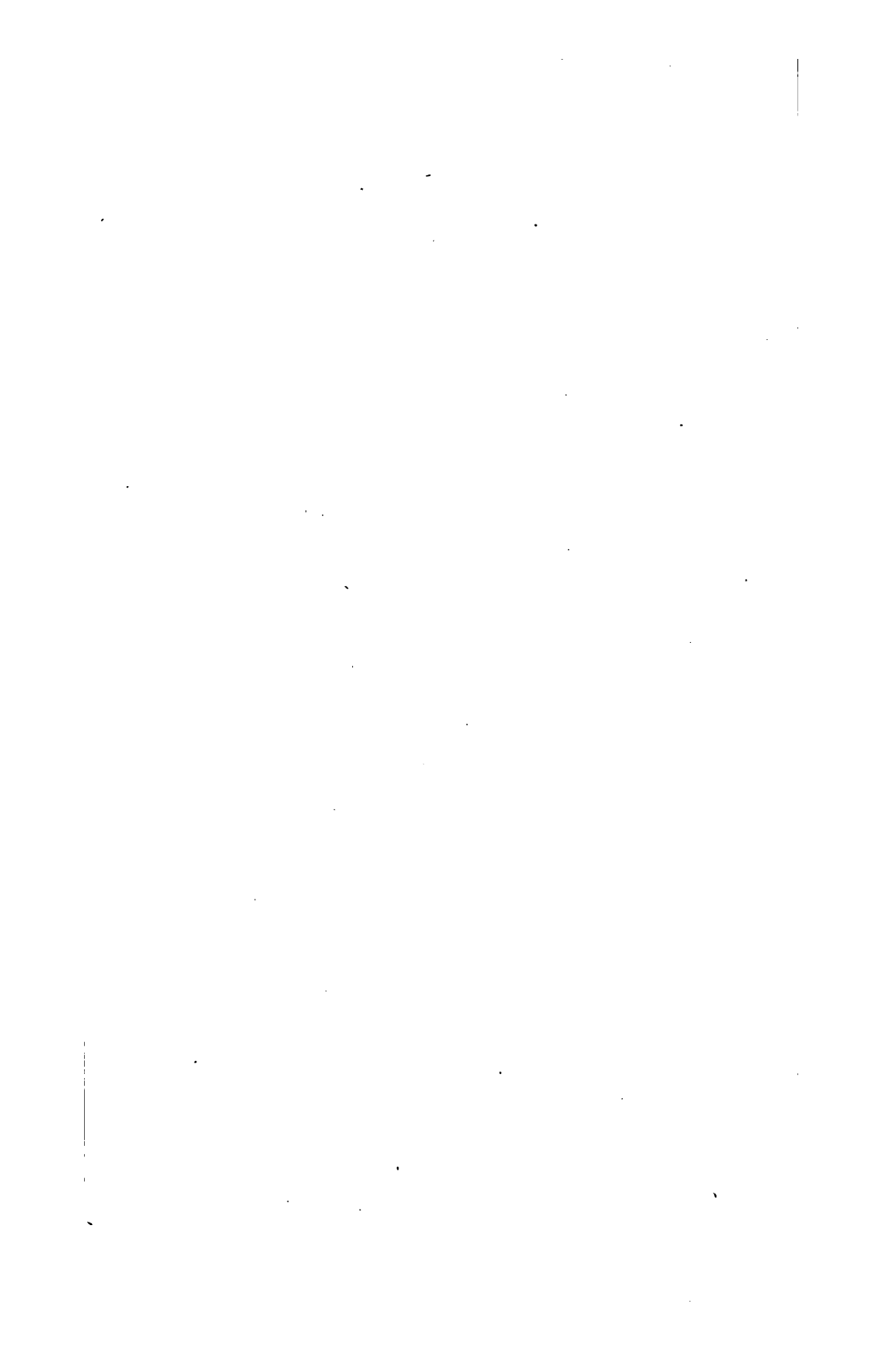
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C A I N.

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Holtermann.



C A I N,

A MYSTERY BY LORD BYRON,

CRITICALLY EXAMINED

BY

ADOLPH HOLTERMANN.

Inaugural Dissertation

for the attainment of the degrees of Doctor of Philosophy

and Master of Arts at the University of Rostock.

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Every man in every climate of the globe grows up amongst certain forms of worship or religious rites, to which his nation, tribe or kinsmen expect him to submit; and he will submit as long as he finds in those symbols a fit expression for his own thoughts and sentiments, or as long as custom and habit exercise over him an all-powerful sway. But that spirit who made the symbols and forms of worship will not be identified with what he has made. As the mind of man grows, the symbols and forms must change or idolatry and spiritual death will follow. God never ceases to put to every man the question: ^{Is 8-21} Doest thou worship me, the Creator and Maker of all things or that which I have made, the creature. Doest thou worship the symbol or that which the symbol represents? — And accordingly as a man answers this question, he will take his position with regard to all worship customary and traditional.

But not every man hears that great question put to him, or if he hears it, lays it to heart. Most men living without intercourse with the spiritual world accept, for the sake of ease and comfort, the teachings and interpretations of their fellow-men, and in their sensual ways make an outcry against any one who dares to think, and to disparage what sensual worship must deem most sacred — the form.

And it is not a rare occurrence in history that a thinker not only stood isolated in the crowd of not-thinking men, but was also assailed and persecuted as a heretic and enemy of God and man, though he above all proved to be a lover of both.

Therefore, a man who believes in God and not in words and names must know what he has to expect. He must be wise and brave and not wonder at the knocks and blows an unfriendly world is likely to give him. He must live in harmony with himself and his God, be a reformer and benefactor in his place and rather die, than submit to dissembling and lying.

Such mortals, however, are rare. Men with high aims and beautiful visions we have and not a few, but they mostly lack that strength and unity of will, which is necessary to realise them. Their aspirations are not clear and pure enough and in the midst of the manifold distracting forces and impediments, which surround them, they too often fall into their own snares, whilst battling with the world.

Byron was such a man. He was a genius, a man open to ecstasy and divine illumination, and yet, we cannot call him a wise man. He did not rule, but was ruled. Through his want of self-command he was his own slave and became the victim of his passions, and we may well say, of his talents and virtues also. This is deplorable. Nevertheless let us recognise genius and honour it. Its very scarcity ought to make us generous towards the faults and errors that too often accompany it. For geniuses are the favourites of Heaven, are our seers, prophets and teachers, are the salt that keeps the world from rotting.

Müller, Zedlitz, Moore, Bulwer and many other men of fame and talent have paid their homage to Byron in prose and verse, but the most lasting monument he has received

from Goethe¹⁾. To him he was a modern Icarus — a designation very suitable not only to Byron, but to all those high-minded and talented spirits who love to be noble, generous and good, yet are led astray by their ill-guided ambition and want of wisdom.

These introductory remarks were suggested to us by the very piece of poetical production we are about to examine. „Cain“ is a work of an essentially religious character, and there is nothing in any man's biography that interests us so much, as his relation to religion in the widest sense of the word. We feel, that all other relationships revolve around this one as their centre and sun; and perhaps this is one reason why some critics have considered „Cain“ the grandest poem Byron ever wrote.

C A I N.

Byron calls this drama of his a „Mystery“ in conformity with an ancient title annexed to dramas upon similar subjects, which were styled „Mysteries or Moralities“²⁾. We will not quarrel with a name, but we do not think this title very appropriate to a work, composed in the 19th century, and which is in thought and design so unlike the Mysteries or Miracle-plays of the Middle-age. These were intended to propagate among the lower and ignorant class of the population some knowledge of the actual contents of the Bible; for to

¹⁾ cf. Goethe's Faust Part II, Act III. Goethe has commemorated Byron in the person of „Euphorion“, an intended personification of poetry. That beautiful dirge of the Chorus on the death of Euphorion

„Nicht allein, wo du auch weilest“ etc.

is likely to outlast all panegyrics on Byron, present and to come.

²⁾ cf. Byron's preface to „Cain“.

whatever purposes they have served in course of time, this was their original and principal aim. But Byron's „Cain“ has no such purport, nor could have it, at a time and in a country where religious knowledge was certainly far enough spread as to suppose that everybody, the most ignorant only excepted, was well acquainted with the first few chapters in Genesis. Besides, we shall see that the contents of this Mystery are, strictly speaking, not biblical at all; they are so in name, but not in matter, and we may state here at the very threshold of our essay, that the drama contains essentially nothing else and nothing less, than the author's own relation to the theology of his day. It consists of three acts, and the three unities of Time, Place and Action, to which Byron, in all other matters so adverse to restrictions, thought all dramatical compositions ought to be limited, are adhered to. But these three are not in unison with a fourth unity, if we may say so, and that is the spirit of the drama. This spirit is a child of the 19th century, pondering over the time, place and action of an old and mythical past, and trying — but not successfully — to make that past time a present one.

For the benefit of those among our readers who are not well acquainted with the drama, we will endeavour to give the contents of it, by means of quotations and narration, though we have not much confidence in doing it satisfactorily. There is too little action in the drama and too much reflection of a theological and philosophical, and even illogical nature, to allow of a clear and well-connected summary.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE.

Men	Adam,	Cain,	Abel.
Spirits	Angel of the Lord,	Lucifer.	
Women	Eve,	Adah,	Zillah.

Adam and Eve are the parents of Cain, Adah, Abel and Zillah; Adah being Cain's wife, and Zillah Abel's.

The first act introduces the whole family of men and women as being of one mind in their religious views and manner of worship, with the exception of Cain, who differs. In the opening scene they all pray, one after another, whilst Cain is silent.

Adam.	But thou, my eldest son, art silent still.
Cain.	'Tis better I should be so.
Adam.	Wherefore so?
Cain.	I have nought to ask.
Adam.	Nor aught to thank for?
Cain.	No.
Adam.	Dost thou not live?
Cain.	Must I not die?
Eve.	Alas!
	The fruit of the forbidden tree begins
	To fall.

In this strain the conversation proceeds, all the members of the family siding with Adam against Cain, who appears gloomy and discontented, regretting that the tree of life remained untouched, whilst the tree of knowledge was plucked. Being then left to himself, he gives further vent to his sorrowful and rebellious thoughts:

Cain (Solus).	And this is
	Life: Toil: and wherefore should I toil? because
	My Father could not keep his place in Eden.
	What have I done in this? I was unborn,
	I sought not to be born: nor love the state
	To which that birth has brought me. Why did he
	Yield to the serpent and the woman? or

Yielding, why suffer? What was there in this?
 The tree was planted, and why not for him?
 If not, why place him near it, where it grew
 The fairest in the centre? They have but
 One answer to all questions, „'twas his will.
 And he is good“. How know I that? Because
 He is all-powerful must all-good, too, follow?
 I judge but by the fruits — and they are bitter —
 Which I must feed on for a fault not mine.
 Whom have we here? A shape like to the angels etc.

Lucifer appears. He sympathises with Cain, declaring his thoughts to be the thoughts of all worthy of thought. The dialogue following between him and Cain may be considered as a continuation of that soliloquy just quoted. To the mighty questions about the fall of man and the origin of evil others are joined as: Immortality, Happiness, God and Satan, Death and Life, Worship and the like, until Cain, who has never bowed before to God, informs Lucifer, that he promised Abel — Adah having wrung from him with tears this promise — to offer up with him on an altar. Then Adah appears, to fetch Cain away. On seeing that Cain intends to go with Lucifer, she too will follow him and not leave her husband; but Lucifer declines her company and a new discussion arises between the three personages (Cain holding with Lucifer) on the subjects mentioned above, with occasionally very philosophical remarks on Truth, Sin, Omnipotence, Eternity, Angels, Knowledge, Love and so on, until Lucifer leaves with Cain, Adah exclaiming: „Cain! my brother! Cain!“

The **second** act, consisting of two scenes, is wholly confined to Cain's intercourse with Lucifer.

The first scene, headed „The abyss of Space“ begins as follows:

Cain. I tread on air, and sink not; yet I fear
 To sink.

- Lucifer. Have faith in me, and thou shalt be
Borne on the air of which I am the prince.
- Cain. Can I do so without impiety?
- Lucifer. Believe, and sink not: doubt and perish! thus
Would run the edict of the other God,
Who names me demon to his angels; they
Echo the sound to miserable things,
Which knowing nought beyond their shallow senses
Worship the word which strikes their ear, and deem
Evil or good what is proclaimed to them
In their abasement. I will have none such:
Worship or worship not, thou shalt behold
The world beyond thy little world, nor be
Amerced, for doubts beyond thy little life,
With torture of my dooming. There will come
An hour, when, toss'd upon some water drops,
A man shall say to a man, „Believe in me,
And walk the waters“: and the man shall walk
The billows and be safe. I will not say
Believe in me, as a conditional creed
To save thee; but fly with me o'er the gulf
Of space an equal flight, and I will show
What thou dar'st not deny, the history
Of past, of present, and of future worlds.

They „move like sunbeams onward“, Earth and Paradise gradually disappearing in the distance. After a short conversation on Death and Immortality Lucifer draws Cain's attention to the glorious objects around them and the latter falls into rapture at the sight.

- Cain. Oh, thou beautiful
And unimaginable ether! and
Ye multiplying masses of increased
And still increasing lights! what are ye? what
Is this blue wilderness of interminable
Air, where ye roll along, as I have seen
The leaves along the limpid streams of Eden?
Is your course measured for ye? Or do ye
Sweep on in your unbounded revelry
Through an ærial universe of endless
Expansion, at which my soul aches to think,
Intoxicated with eternity?
Oh God? Oh Gods! or whatsoever ye are!

How beautiful ye are! how beautiful
 Your works, or accidents, or whatsoever
 They may be! Let me die, as atoms die,
 (If that they die) or know ye in your might
 And knowledge: My thoughts are not in this hour
 Unworthy what I see, though my dust is;
 Spirit! let me expire, or see them nearer.

But Cain gets no nearer. After a short discussion he is led onward by Lucifer towards „the phantasm of the world, of which his world is but the wreck.“ The lights fade and recede, the stars grow dark, and Cain disappearing with Lucifer through the clouds enters „Hades“ with him (Scene II). All here is „so shadowy and so full of twilight that it speaks of a day past“. Cain sees the phantoms of beings more intelligent and more glorious than man, Lucifer informing his companion, that these lived before Adam, that the world had been destroyed several times before it took its present shape. The phantoms of the Mammoths are seen, which leads to the question, whether the animals too ate of a forbidden tree, „that they must die“. Then the phantasm of an ocean with its past leviathans appear, and an immense serpent, the latter affording another opportunity to ventilate the vexed question about the origin of evil. Lucifer getting somewhat obscene on this occasion. Cain's love to Adah being mentioned, Lucifer calls it „delusion“, but as this makes but little impression on Cain, he reminds him of his brother, who is the parents' favourite son and preferred by Jehovah even. Cain gets somewhat agitated and will not dwell upon these facts. — Having seen the „mighty Pre-Adamites who walked the earth of which ours is the wreck“, he wishes the dwelling of God or that of Lucifer shown him, but Lucifer answers that his human mind cannot grasp „the great double Mysteries, the two Principles“, death alone can show him these. „Then I dread it less“ Cain replies; but the author does not intend him to

return to his earth in any better humour than he was before this journey through Space and this visit to Hades.

- Cain. And to what end have I beheld these things
Which thou hast shown me.
- Lucifer. Didst thou not require
Knowledge? and have I not, in what I show'd
Taught thee, to know thyself?
- Cain. Alas I seem
Nothing
- Lucifer. And this should be the human sum
Of knowledge: to know mortal nature's nothingness;
Bequeath that science to thy children, and
'T will spare them many tortures.
- Cain. Haughty spirit etc.

Lucifer dismisses, however, his pupil with a speech not quite satanical and we take pleasure in repeating here a part of it.

Your reason: — let it not be over-sway'd
By tyrannous threats to force you into faith
'Gainst all external sense and inward feeling:
Think and endure, — and form an inner world
In your own bosom — where the outward fails;
So shall you nearer be the spiritual
Nature, and war triumphant with your own.

The **third** act introduces Cain as husband and father. Adah bids him not to awaken their little son Enoch who is asleep.

- Cain. How lovely he appears: his little cheeks
In their pure incarnation, vying with
The rose leaves strewn beneath them.

But on farther beholding him, he again begins his „melancholy yearnings“ and mourns for Paradise, Adah endeavouring in vain to cheer him. The wonders he has beheld have sted him nothing. He only feels his own insignificance all the more keenly now, and he upbraids God for having made man the „nothing“ which he is. — A hint is thrown out by

Adah, that some day perhaps an atonement might be made for the redemption of mankind, by sacrificing „the harmless to the guilty“, but Cain will not hear of it, and at the sight of the two altars, which Abel has made to sacrifice upon, he declares to have no offering nor to be possessed of that gentle and contrite spirit which must accompany it.

Abel enters, and Adah having soon after left with her child, Cain is now called upon to sacrifice. Cain resists and asks his brother to leave him.

Cain.	I pray thee leave me.
Abel.	Not till we have pray'd and sacrificed together.
Cain.	Abel, I pray thee, sacrifice alone — Jehovah loves thee well.
Abel.	Both well, I hope.
Cain.	But thee the better: I care not for that; Thou art fitter for his worship than I am: Revere him, then — but let it be alone — At least without me.

But Cain, yielding at last, gathers fruit for his offering. The altars being dressed, they kindle a flame upon them. Abel prays kneeling, and after him Cain, standing erect, holds a speech. Then „the fire upon the altar of Abel kindles into a column of the brightest flame and ascends to heaven, while a whirlwind throws down the altar of Cain and scatters the fruits abroad upon the earth“. Abel, on seeing this, gets frightened and entreats his brother, to try another sacrifice. Cain refuses. He „will build no more altars nor suffer any“, and is going to cast down Abel's altar, „with its blood of lambs and kids, which fed on milk, to be destroy'd in blood“. Abel opposes him, until Cain in his rage strikes him with a brand on the temples, which he snatches from the altar and Abel dies. Cain immediately repents what he has done.

Cain.	— — — — My brother! — No,
	He will not answer to that name; for brethren

Smite not each other. Yet — yet — speak to me.
 Oh! for a word more of that gentle voice,
 That I may bear to hear my own again.

Zillah enters and beholds the scene, leaves it again to call her parents and returns with Adam, Eve and Adah. Cain hears their lamentations with silence, Eve having pronounced a fearful curse on the murderer leaves him, Adam and Zillah soon follow and only Adah remains.

Cain. Leave me!

Adah. Why, all have left thee.

Cain. And wherefore lingerest thou? Dost thou not fear
 To dwell with one who hath done this?

Adah. I fear

Nothing except to leave thee, much as I
 Shrink from the deed which leaves thee brotherless.
 I must not speak of this — it is between thee
 And the great God.

A voice from within exclaims: Cain! Cain!

Adah. Hear'st thou that voice?

The voice within: Cain! Cain!

Adah. It soundeth like an angel's tone.

Enter the Angel of the Lord

Angel. Where is thy brother Abel?

Cain. Am I then

My brother's keeper¹⁾.

The angel proclaims Cain's punishment. He shall be a fugitive and vagabond on earth; but shall go forth in safety. „Who slayeth Cain, a sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on his head.“ Then having set a mark on Cain's brow, as a sign of „exemption from such deeds as he has done“, the angel disappears.

Adah. He's gone, let us go forth:

— — — — —
 Cain. Eastward from Eden will we take our way;
 'Tis the most desolate, and suits my steps.

¹⁾ We must remark here, that this is not exactly the language of a repenting Cain.

Adah. Lead! thou shalt be my guide, and may our God
Be thine! Now let us carry forth our children
Cain. And he who lieth there was childless. I
Have dried the fountain of a gentle race,
Which might have graced his recent marriage couch
And might have temper'd this stern blood of mine,
Uniting with our children Abel's offspring:
O Abel!
Adah. Peace be with him!
Cain. But with me!

Thus ends the drama, called „Cain“. The hero's name is familiar to us and his character as described in Genesis Chapt. 4th also, but who is this Cain of Byron's? He is not a bad and wicked man, who kills his brother from spite and jealousy or some similar low and ignoble motives, but still he is a murderer. The question arises, from what reasons?

Byron writes in a letter to M^r Murray (Pisa 1822) as follows: „Cain fell into the frame of mind which led to the catastrophe from mere internal irritation, not premeditation or envy of Abel (which would have made him contemptible), but from rage and fury against the inadequacy of his state to his conceptions, and which discharges itself rather against life and the author of life, than the mere living.“

According to that we are to see in Cain not a common and contemptible murderer, but a very uncommon, high-minded and respectable one. „Wollte Lord Byron“, says Goethe, „einen Cain schreiben, so musste er ihn so behandeln, sonst lieber gar nicht;“ which words we thus translate: „If Byron wanted to write a Cain, he ~~must~~^{did} do it in the manner he did, or else not at all.“ Perhaps so; but why? We would rather say: Byron writing a Cain could not help identifying himself to a certain extent with his hero (as he was wont to do) and of course could not make him a contemptible personage, not being one himself.

But did not the poet commit a most fundamental error

in expecting us to dismiss from our minds the notion we hitherto connected with the name of Cain, before we can find his Cain at all digestible as a hero? It would be different, if our notion was a wrong one, produced by misconceived ideas and prejudice, however old and ancient, and if the poet had intended to set us right about the real character of Cain, such as the author of Genesis perhaps meant to depict, but did not succeed. Of course we cannot suppose that such was the intention of the poet; it would have been simply absurd. For the character of Cain, as related in Genesis, has been believed in, not because men respected the Bible as an indisputable authority, but because they found it true at every hour of their lives, that a bad man will slay a good one from some low and contemptible motives.

Now, as Byron did not mean to redress our notion about the biblical Cain, what reason could he have for calling his drama „Cain“ and introducing his hero as the son of Adam? There must have been floating in his head some vague notion of poetical identity between his Cain and the Bible's. He must have fancied that he was reproducing a character whose biographical facts would bear such an interpretation as he gave them. But they will not. Not without sophistry can the murder of an innocent man be made to spring from a noble or only from a not contemptible source. Therefore, Byron's Cain does not grow out of the old story of the Bible naturally and youthfully like a new branch out of an old stem, no, he is only grafted on it, as it were, feeding on the blood and sap of the original, without being penetrated by it. He lives on it like a parasite. He has the body and name of the biblical Cain, but not his soul. He has the soul of an Englishman of the 19th century and yet affects not to know what „snows“ are. In vain the poet tries to disguise his hero. Not for a moment do we believe that it is the son

of Adam ~~who~~ speaks to us; on the contrary we identify him at once with Lord Byron himself, as we would identify an orator with the sentiments he utters. For „Cain“ as a drama is altogether too undramatical and too rhetorical, to direct our attention to any other personage, but the central one, which is Cain, the propounder of the author's thoughts. And curious enough, the author who envelops his text, like a clergyman, with his own reflections and buries it in the thunder of his rhetorical and poetical speeches, fancies to have been particularly polite and reverent towards Holy Writ by doing so: by making „as little alteration of Scripture even of Words as the rythm would permit“¹⁾. Of course neither party has gained by this mere outward homage. The poet, not having wholly detached his Cain from the biblical story, so as to remould him altogether according to his wants, has thereby compromised his liberty, whilst Scripture is entirely misrepresented. Hence a certain logical confusion is discernible throughout the piece. The first-born son of Adam and Byron's Cain, ill-mixed as they are, speak alternately out of one body, so that all unity of character and all harmony between thought and action is continually disturbed. For example: Does any body find it easy to believe, that a high- and noble-minded man, who cannot suppress his doubts about the adequateness of our christian dogmas and turns a sceptic, not from sensual, but from spiritual motives, should slay an innocent brother-man from mere internal irritation, from rage and fury — not against this brother — but against the inadequacy of his state to his conceptions? Truth-loving and truth-seeking men (and Byron is one of them) may be naturally passionate, but if they have height of thought and conceptions, we expect them to be calm, composed and cool.

¹⁾ cf. Byron's preface to „Cain“.

It is true, there have been critics and Goethe among the number, to whom the death of Abel in Byron's „Cain“ seemed to rest on a very good foundation. Yet, glad as we should be to concur in our opinion with a man like Goethe, on this point we cannot. We can understand the death of Caesar according to Shakespeare, or the death of Egmont according to Goethe, or the death of Abel according to Genesis, but we cannot understand the death of Abel according to Byron. And indeed, we believe that Byron himself was not clear on this head. Having sent his manuscript of „Cain“ to M^r Murray, he expresses himself in a letter to M^r Moore (19th Sept. 1821) as follows: „The consequence is that Cain comes back and kills Abel in a fit of dissatisfaction, partly with the politics of Paradise, which had driven them all out of it and partly because (as it is written in Genesis) Abel's sacrifice was the more acceptable to the Deity.“ And in a letter of his, written to M^r Murray, a few months later (Nov. 3^d 1821) we read those words already quoted and which we will, for greater clearness sake, quote here again: „Till he (Cain) falls into the frame of mind that leads to the catastrophe, from mere internal irritation, not premeditation or envy of Abel (which would have made him contemptible), but from rage and fury against the inadequacy of his state to his conceptions and which discharges itself rather against life“ (why not against his own life then?) „and the author of life, than the mere living.“ Now, how shall we make these two explanations agree? First it is a fit of dissatisfaction and envy of Abel's more acceptable sacrifice; afterwards it is no envy of Abel, no fit, but mere internal irritation and the inadequacy of his state to his conceptions, that leads to the catastrophe. Or, if we only adhere to the latter interpretation, where is the logical necessity for such a catastrophe, as has been thought proper by the author to bring about? Are such feelings and

thoughts as Cain indulges in: dissatisfaction with one's own existence and state of knowledge, fear and hatred of death, love of wife and children, love of truth, metaphysical inquiries, a scorn of traditional worship and hypocrisy, pride, an ardent love of Nature and her beauties — are such sentiments likely to make a murderer of a man? — a Cain? — This is what we want to know. And likelihood would not suffice. In a drama we expect the catastrophe to rest on an inner or eternal necessity and also that the hero in it be not so much a doer as a sufferer.

„Cain“, therefore, is no drama, nor a tragedy, but a Rhapsody, as the author himself calls it on one occasion. In a letter to Mr Moore (19th Sept. 1821) we read these words: „I trust that the rhapsody has arrived. It is in three acts, entitled a Mystery according to the former christian custom and in honour of what it will probably remain to the reader.“ This latter somewhat pert and flippant remark shows nevertheless distinctly enough that Byron himself felt how unclear and vague this composition of his was, considered as a whole; and by calling it a rhapsody he proves likewise that he was conscious of its rhapsodical character, that is to say, of its being incoherent in its parts. It is a work where the transitions are not made by thought, but by a word or words, and it reminds us of a musical Potpourri, which charms us now with this, now with another melody, the link between the melodies consisting in nothing but a few leading cords. But as a Potpourri, however beautiful in its parts satisfies no one who knows what a piece of music ought to be, so it is with „Cain“, as a drama. It attracts through the manly and daring tone, that pervades it, through its beautiful and poetical passages here and there, but it repulses us through its imperfect design and its want of clear and lucid perceptions.

Having thus spoken of „Cain“ in general as a work of art, let us examine the hero of the drama still more closely, and see, what kind of character the poet has actually given us in him. X

Cain is a religious sceptic and as such in conflict with the society of all those who adhere to the orthodox creed. Others pray; but he is silent. Whatever reasons may be brought forward in favor of a particular worship, he knows as many against it. The religion of his day does not suffice him; for he reasons and thinks. He wishes to explore and to know. The name of goodness shall not deceive him, he will see, if it be goodness. He „never could reconcile“, he says, „what he saw with what he heard.“ In other words, he sees no harmony between traditional worship and his reason. Now, perceiving that he cannot with any sincerity of heart believe, behave and talk as his kinsmen (or the world at large) wish him to do, he naturally gets into a state of great uneasiness and „internal irritation.“ What is he to do? — Shall he not trust his own eyesight? Shall he accept and imitate the manners, opinions and phrases of others, in order to appear what he is not? — Shall he say to his intellect: Be not! or to his reason: Slumber! or to his thought: Hide thyself! Shall he listen to the admonitions of a low and contemptible prudence, which advises him to conform to the religion of society, although he knows he must thereby become untrue to himself and false to others? No — he is too proud and too bold a character to do that, he loves truth and knowledge too well, to acquiesce in a cowardly surrender to hypocrisy and ignorance. But alas, his superiority of intellect has isolated him. He thinks „alone“.

So far we can follow, and sympathise with him. But when he begins to call this isolation „misery“, when he com-

plains that he is not „happy“, that life is but toil, followed by death, when he grumbles and growls at the general fate of man and quarrels with his creator, we feel ourselves surrounded by the thickest fog, which we would try in vain to disperse. It is as if Cain wittingly increased his perplexities. He revels in imaginary difficulties and makes what is dark still more dark, like a man who, wishing to be in a dark room, tries to shut out day-light, by stuffing up every chink and crevice, where the rays of the sun may enter.

No doubt this arises from the author's own position to the thing he struggles with. His enemy proves too strong for him, and instead of fighting his way, at all risks, towards truth, light and spiritual health, he begins to writhe and to wail and falls in love with his gloom. „Man sieht“, says Goethe, „wie Byron die Unzulänglichkeit der kirchlichen Dogmen zu schaffen gemacht, und wie er sich durch ein solches Stück von einer ihm aufgedrungenen Lehre zu befreien gesucht“. „We see how Byron was harassed by the inadequateness of our christian dogmas and how he tried to rid himself of a creed that had been forced upon him.“ This remark of Goethe's gives us a very good clue as to the origin of „Cain“, and there is not the least doubt about it, that such a state of mind gave birth to the drama. But alas, Cain does not succeed in ridding himself of what was heterogeneous to his mind, no more did the author. The latter, having misinterpreted his own mind, creates a character who is to live and act as a mere rebel and murderer, but he has given him so much of his own high and noble spirit, that we cannot but admire him. He speaks boldly, but not „as the first rebel and the first murderer may be supposed to speak“¹⁾. He is too intellectual

¹⁾ cf. Byron's letter to Mr Murray 6 Febr. 1822.

to be a mere rebel and murderer. He penetrates the shallowness of popular theology, hates the cowardly fear of men to utter a doubt, — a fear which always breeds hypocrisy — and he uncovers unmercifully all the heretical thoughts that may possibly arise in a human breast, trained in the christian religion by means of catechisms, hymns and sermons. He looks at popular theology with the eyes of orthodoxy, but at the same time lets the light of reason shine upon it. He is a man who cannot believe, yet dares not disbelieve the established creed, and in this vexing dilemma he takes a secret delight in making the dogmas of the Church totter and tremble before his thought.

The poet has associated his hero with Lucifer, not that he be tempted and seduced, but in order to fortify him in the position he has already taken. Lucifer is no devil or demon, like „Mephistopheles“ who wishes to draw „Faust“ from the right path by appealing to his sensual desires, no, Lucifer is a friend of Cain, a related spirit, another Cain or Cain's alter ego. He treats Cain very much like a master does a pupil. He journeys with him through Space and Hades, to show him the wonders of the world, to make him feel that he is the inhabitant of a universe, wherein a local Paradise, a local theology, and even a special Earth must disappear like a grain of dust, and thus to add new fuel to his scepticism. His influence over him is the same as a man experiences in reading a book that expresses his own views, only more boldly and clearly.

It is true, the author does not exactly wish us to take this view of Lucifer's doings and intentions. According to him he is to depress Cain still more in his own estimation „by showing him infinite things and his own abasement“ and he seems to accomplish it. But this is inconsistent. What mind, we ask, can behold infinite things without being

ennobled by it and becoming less base, than ^{it} he was before. A gloomy, discontented, envious, and spiteful Cain, a mere rebel and murderer, would never have wished to see infinite things or, if wishing, would never have been able to see them; for what is infinite can only be seen by a mind infinite, noble and high.

When „Cain“ first appeared in print, it was received by the clergy and their friends as a kind of challenge. „The parsons“, says Byron in a letter to M^r Moore (Febr. 20th 1822) „are all preaching at it (Cain), from Kentish-town and Oxford to Pisa; — the scoundrels of priests who do more harm to religion, than all the infidels, that ever forgot their catechisms.“ — Whence this rage? If Lucifer and Cain had really and merely spoken, „as the first rebel and the first murderer may be supposed to speak“, how could the clergy have become alarmed by it? — That Cain is a little wild and passionate in his speech and Lucifer somewhat mocking and taunting in his metaphysics, yea even the fact that Cain becomes ultimately a murderer, did not deceive the clergy. If they had not felt that all this only belonged to the outer frame-work of the piece, and that the blow was aimed as something very different from what it appears to strike, they might have very reasonably exclaimed: Behold, what a man's heresies and scepticism lead to; proud reason or philosophy is only the parent of murder! But no, it is the laying open of the inadequateness of our christian dogmas and the uprightness of a man at war with religious doctrines and cant, that put them out of temper. The mood and humour in which the poem had been written or that which we found to have given birth to it, could not but communicate itself to the readers, and perhaps also the author's public and private life seemed too clear a commentary on

„Cain“ as to look for any other interpretations. A free spirit wrestling with Church-doctrines, which have been forced upon him, is never a very pleasing spectacle to the clergy. „The same outcry“, (as against Cain) says Byron in a letter to M^r Douglas (Febr. 6th 1822), „was raised against Priestley, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire and all the men, who dared to put tithes to the question.“ Consequently Byron himself became conscious of having done something else and something more than drawn a picture of a mere rebel and murderer in his „Cain“, though he seems to have considered it his duty to believe that it was very wrong to put the authority of a Church-creed and of established views about God and the world in question.

Offensive to the clergy must also have been the character of Abel as exhibited by Byron. This Abel is not the Bible's Abel, no more than Cain is the Bible's Cain. Byron's Abel is the type of a modern clergyman. His manners are intrusive and imprudent. He sees Cain in a state of great agitation and yet exasperates him still more, by persuading him to sacrifice with him. He seems to have no dread of hypocrisy, which every true man has. He forgets that truth and love and beautiful sentiments alone can convert, and that it is a very dangerous thing to induce somebody to an act of worship against his will and inclination. Abel gets slain through his foolish meddling with the infidel, and although we dislike to see any violence done to him, his zeal has been so injudicious and impure, that his death does not gain our sympathy and pity.

Glancing once more at the whole of the drama and keeping in mind what Goethe considered to have been its source and origin, we must own, that the conception as such is grand and beautiful and worthy of the poet, of any

poet in fact, however great. A great and mighty intellect struggling with religious doctrines forced upon him and perishing in the struggle may indeed serve as a subject for a tragedy of the highest kind. For „a poor man, in our day“, says Carlyle¹⁾, has many gods foisted upon him; and big voices bid him: „Worship, or be — !“ in a menacing and confusing manner. What shall he do? By far the greater part of said gods, current in public, whether canonised by Pope or Populus, are mere dumb Apises and beatified Prize-oxen; — nay some of them, who have articulate faculties, are devils instead of gods. A poor man that would save his soul alive is reduced to the sad necessity of sharply trying his gods, whether they are divine or not; which is a terrible pass for mankind; and lays an awful problem on each man. The man must do it however. At his own peril he will have to do this problem too, which is one of the awfullest; and his neighbours, all but a most select portion of them,⁶ portion generally not clad in official tiaras, can be of next to no help to him in it, nay rather will infinitely hinder him in it as matters go.“

With these beautiful and mighty words, penned by a great and noble writer we might fitly take leave of Cain and our reader, if we did not find it difficult to withhold a few more observations concerning the „Mystery“.

„Byron“, says Goethe, „war gar zu unklar über sich selbst. „Byron was altogether too unclear regarding himself;“ otherwise, we add, he would not have written a „Mystery“, but a drama or a tragedy — a drama, if his hero was to come out victorious from the struggle; a tragedy, if not. Either way might have served its purpose and represented a solution of that problem, which Carlyle describes and which is the

¹⁾ Latter-day pamphlets p. 254.

very one, that prompted Byron to write his „Cain“, though he does seem conscious of it. A victorious hero would have advanced from a state of mere rebellion to the knowledge of God and the humility of a real worshipper, whilst a perishing hero might have ended as a self-murderer or in some similar tragical manner. A drama would have solved the problem directly, a tragedy indirectly and the latter might have been chosen with preference, in treating a subject of such delicacy and depth. For it is more difficult to delineate with clearness what a man ought to be and ought to do (drama), than what he ought not (tragedy). But of course in either case, the 4th chapter in Genesis could never have been thought of as a suitable foundation to work upon.



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